(Un)Bundled Services: A Stakeholders’ Framework for Understanding the Impact of MOOC-like, Third-Party Online Courses

Abstract

Due to the rise of MOOC-like courses available from third-party providers, the services universities offer students have the potential to become unbundled. Yet the possible impacts of these changes are not well understood. Few university stakeholders can articulate the actual value students receive from a university education, aside from instruction in their chosen field. How universities are doing in this regard is not well known. Furthermore, different stakeholders may have different answers to these questions. This paper proposes a framework that stakeholders—including students, faculty, and administrators—may use as a basis for inquiry into these important questions at institutions of higher education. This effort also lays the groundwork for future scholarly research about the impact of and responses to third-party online courses on higher education and its stakeholders.

1. Introduction

Online learning, popularly known as e-learning, has experienced tremendous growth in recent years. In a recent study titled Going the Distance: Online Education in the United States 2011, conducted by the Babson Survey Research Group and the College Board [1], the leading barometer of online learning in the United States, it was reported that the growth rate for online enrollments outpaces the growth for higher education enrollment by a factor of 10. More than 6 million students in the United States have taken at least one online course and approximately one third of university students have taken at least one online course according to the report.

At the same time, universities are seeing portents of financial difficulty. Consider this. State and local government appropriations for higher education have steadily decreased over the years and “fell to $5,906 in 2012, a 25-year low in inflation-adjusted terms,” for full time equivalent (FTE) (State Higher Education Finance, 2012). This has put tremendous financial pressure on higher education institutions to seek alternative funding options. In some states declining enrollments compound the problem. For example, in the state of Michigan high school graduation rates are projected to fall by more than 15% in the coming years [2]. As universities struggle to meet their financial challenges, significant costs over the years have been transferred to students. Tuition, the largest component of a university’s revenue, has increased by 1120% since 1978 [3] and has outpaced increases in the cost of medical care, housing, food and the consumer price index. This has resulted in increased student borrowing, which has now surpassed $1 trillion [4] and is expected to be the next bubble after housing. Increased borrowing by students due to the continuous increase in tuition puts pressure on families to reevaluate the value of education. Moody’s provides a negative outlook for higher education in their 2013 review and suggests that adjustments may have to be made by universities for long-term growth.

Into this gap have stepped companies such as Coursera, Udacity, and edX, which hold the promise of cutting costs by allowing universities to outsource many of the functions previously performed by in-house faculty. These companies have already partnered with universities such as Stanford and Harvard to create MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) available to interested individuals throughout the world. One of the first courses to draw attention to MOOCs was Introduction to Artificial Intelligence, offered by Peter Norvig and Sebastian Thrun of Stanford in 2011. The course had an enrollment of 160,000 [5]. Other MOOCs, most on a smaller scale, have shown similar results. The New York Times went so far as to name 2012 the “Year of the MOOC” extolling the virtues of this paradigm shift in higher education [6].

The next step has been universities and university systems announcing partnerships with online course providers to offer courses for credit. Recently, such a partnership was announced between Coursera and the University of Colorado system, the University System of Georgia, the University of Houston system, the University of Kentucky, the University of Nebraska, the University of New Mexico, the State University of New York system, the Tennessee Board of Regents and the University of Tennessee systems, and West Virginia University [7].

Countering this trend, a number of high-profile schools including Duke, Vanderbilt, and Amherst have backed out of partnerships with online course providers after faculty...
expressed serious concerns about these courses and their impacts on higher education [8]. Faculty members in the Philosophy Department at San Jose State University actually refused to use materials developed by Harvard professor Michael Sandel and housed at edX, for a justice course [9]. They went so far as to write an open letter to Mr. Sandel, suggesting that professors who make this kind of content available may be to blame for the dismantling of academic departments and the phasing out of professors.

Even among university administrators, MOOC-like courses are not universally supported. According to a recent report released by Babson Survey Research Group [1], academic leaders remain unconvinced that MOOCs “represent a sustainable method for offering online courses.” The report states that only 2.6 percent of higher education institutions currently have a MOOC with another 9.4 percent report being in the planning stages. From the industry perspective, Dennis Yang, President and Chief Operating Officer of Udemy, believes MOOCs are in the “hype cycle” of development, in the heightened expectation about the possibilities for MOOCs will peak, then crash, and then return to a stable plateau [10].

2. Apples and Oranges: MOOCs and T-POCs Defined

Before a productive discussion about these changes can take place, it is important to delineate its focus. Some discussions about the role of outsourced online learning at universities have used the term “MOOC,” when in fact, what is being talked about is something quite different. In this section, we will define what a MOOC is—and what it is not. We will then propose a new term for the kinds of courses that are being contemplated at many universities and already being implemented at others.

As the name implies, a MOOC, or Massive Open Online Course, is first and foremost, a course offered via the Internet. As such, it has much in common with standard online courses, including video lectures, written materials, online exams, etc. In many ways, a student would be hard-pressed to tell a MOOC and a standard online course apart. What makes MOOCs different is the fact that they are open to everyone. An individual does not need to be admitted to a university to take a MOOC; the courses are offered free of charge to anyone who is interested.

Since MOOCs are open to anyone without charge, the number of students enrolling in a specific course can be huge, hence the “massive” descriptor. While all MOOCs are not as large as the 160,000 enrollment in the 2011 Stanford artificial intelligence course [5], they are considerably larger than the largest standard online course. The size difference necessarily creates a different dynamic between students and professor. MOOCs rely on automated grading of some kind and try to foster online interaction between students and, in some cases, teaching assistants. Students may receive a certificate of completion for finishing a MOOC, but they do not receive academic credit for the course.

Although MOOCs are an important innovation in education, the real disruptive factor for universities and their stakeholders comes not from MOOCs but from online courses being offered via partnerships with companies like Coursera. It is important to note that although these kinds of courses are sometimes referred to as MOOCs, they are distinct from MOOCs in several ways. In contrast to the “open” descriptor, students will pay to take these courses as part of a tuition-funded degree program; and universities will be charged for using the provider’s platform and for using online course content. The closed nature of these courses will necessarily remove the “massive” aspect of the courses, as will the fact that faculty can adapt and customize them to fit the requirements of their own students and programs [7]. Reflecting these distinctions, some reports have hedged by using the descriptor “MOOC-like” (see, for example [11]); however, this term still minimizes considerable differences that must be acknowledged for productive inquiry to occur.

So what should these new kinds of courses be called? Lacking the “massive” and the “open” designators, the remaining “OC” ends up being a banal acronym for “online course.” Yet, unlike the traditional online course, which is typically produced in-house by an individual professor, these new courses take advantage of economies of scale. A professor at Stanford or Harvard can produce lectures, course materials, and exams once, and this content can be copied and disseminated at a low cost, carrying the Stanford or Harvard brand, in unlimited numbers. Likewise, the technology for grading and other processing can be centrally created and then disseminated through the platform provided by the company.

For this reason, we propose the term Third-Party Online Courses (T-POC). This term makes it clear that the course content was not produced in-house, while also removing the suggestion that the courses will necessarily be taught in massive sections or that they will be open to everyone. It also helps distinguish MOOCs, which are typically based on altruistic motives such as “the democratizing of education” [10]) from T-POCs, which typically carry with them other motives for various stakeholders—cost cutting, profit, convenience, etc.

3. Need for Inquiry
With the advent of T-POCs, new questions must be considered by the stakeholders of universities. Contrary to what might be assumed, the most important questions about T-POCs should not be focused primarily on technical capital. After all, the technology that enables T-POCs is not groundbreaking. Standard online courses have used recorded content, automated grading, etc., dating back to the 1990s. Course management technologies such as Blackboard and Moodle have been regularly updated since this time, but, just as the internal combustion engine has been fine-tuned for over one hundred years, there has been no fundamental change in structure or approach to the technology of online learning. As Clay Shirky has argued, “These tools don’t get socially interesting until they get technologically boring. It isn’t when the shiny new tools show up that their uses start permeating society. It’s when everybody is able to take them for granted.” [12].

Now that online learning is taken for granted and is moving into a new phase of development, questions should be focused on social capital, which might be defined as “the collective value of all ‘social networks’ and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other” [13]. As Shirky explains [14], technology can positively or negatively influence social capital; and it can destroy or create new social capital. Decisions about resource allocation should be considered with a full accounting of costs and benefits—including financial, economic, cultural, social, and academic.

Overall questions should focus on the following: What is the impact of T-POCs on different stakeholders? What are the trade-offs, costs, and benefits of T-POCs? What value should be conserved from the current system, some of which may be implicit and not missed until it is gone? In other words, what unintended consequences—good or bad—might occur for various stakeholders as a result of T-POCs? What corresponding adjustments should be made?

In light of these current debates and questions, a great deal of in-depth academic research into the topic is needed because, more than most others, it is highly relevant to the future of academia itself. This research would explore the subject from a variety of angles and from the perspectives of a variety of stakeholders. It would investigate the costs and benefits of T-POCs and evaluate their effectiveness as part of a university education. Above all, it would help cut through media hype and provide a more stable basis for reflection and decision making among various constituent groups.

Given the rapid development of these trends, academic literature on T-POCs has so far been sparse. McCully [15] shows that what MOOCs do best is technical training, certification, and accreditation. Yet, he argues, these endeavors are not the same as education. This is where T-POCs are relevant to the discussion. How does the restricted enrollment and limited size of the T-POC change the MOOC dynamic? What must be included in the bundle to qualify it as education? A framework for stakeholders could help guide this inquiry.

Some recent literature has begun to explore impacts of MOOCs for various stakeholders. For example, Dennis [16] raises questions about the impact of MOOC-like courses on the following stakeholders: “(1) Accreditation agencies; (2) Book publishers; (3) Federal and state subsidies; (4) Rating agencies; (5) Advanced Placement exams; (6) Enrollment and retention managers; (7) Branch campuses; (8) Career counselors; (9) Chief financial officers; (10) Facilities managers; (11) IT managers; (12) Students; (13) Faculty; (14) Venture capitalists; and (15) For-profit schools.” This work shows the potential sweep of stakeholders that must be considered. For purposes of practicality, a framework could narrow the categories to internal stakeholders (students, faculty, and administration) and external stakeholders (such as business, employers, and local communities).

Another dimension could be added to the framework by considering how impacts will be felt in key areas, such as financial, economic, cultural, social, and academic, allowing for a cross-comparison among stakeholders. This more holistic approach would allow for comprehensive discussion and will encourage accounting for all possible costs and benefits. Otherwise, financial impacts, by default, would be the main area to be considered, with other real but hard-to-quantify impacts being ignored or minimized.

Gallagher and LaBrie [17] look at strategies their university, Northeastern, is using to respond to the current climate of innovation. They argue that online learning is a mature market and, as such, requires institutions to develop new strategies to differentiate their online programs. They suggest several, including using analytics, employing strategic faculty models and quality management, and improving online enrollment management. Such efforts can be connected and integrated through a framework for stakeholders.

4. Context and Theory

In addition to taking into account relevant literature, it is important to consider the context in which this discussion is taking place. Universities inhabit an environment where innovation abounds, in which other industries have been radically transformed by innovation, including journalism and entertainment. So far, transformation of higher education has been limited, but the call for change is gaining momentum. At the same time, institutions of
higher education are struggling to reconcile innovation with their long-held missions of scholarship and teaching. For this reason, below we outline the literature of disruptive innovation and of educational theory and practice that underlies our proposed framework.

4.1 Disruptive Innovation

T-POCs are not a phenomenon that developed without warning. Christensen’s [18] theory of disruptive innovation reveals how established industries can, by focusing on their most profitable customers, ignore innovations being applied by new players, initially to low-profit customers. The established firm is not inclined to serve these customers because not only would this effort produce low returns; it would distract from the main focus of the organization. Yet this is where the threat to the established order begins, as the disruptive technology is perfected at the low end and then comes to disrupt the entire industry.

Applying the theory of disruptive innovation to higher education, Christensen predicts that in 15 years, half of all universities will be bankrupt [19]. As a result, universities will evolve to a hybrid model, in which some courses are offered through T-POCs and other courses are offered directly by the university in which a student is enrolled (Howe, 2013). Christensen cites as a comparison the use of hybrid cars, which use electric motor technology but, like gasoline-powered engines, have no distance limitations and are compatible with current energy infrastructure [20].

Similarly, New York University Professor Clay Shirky [21] notes that the services universities offer are currently “bundled” but predicts that MOOC-like courses will force these services to become unbundled, allowing students for the first time to choose which services to get from whom. Instruction and learning, the historic raison d’être of universities, can now be obtained in a different way, leading to questions about the future of universities and what role they will play in preparing graduates to take their place in the workforce and as educated citizens.

According to the theory of disruptive innovation [18], the quality of T-POC instruction will gradually improve until it rivals current methods. Paired with lower costs, this technology will increasingly draw students (and their parents) who are currently beleaguered by high tuition and the prospect of a shaky job market.

University stakeholders who believe higher education will always be able to fall back on its tried and true customer base of 18- to 22-year-old students should note that these are exactly the kinds of customers the theory of disruptive innovation predicts an established institution will focus on, as its upstart rivals innovate with low-profit customers. In the case of higher education, the “low end” is individuals who want to take the classes for reasons other than the primary goal of obtaining an undergraduate or graduate degree. They may be priced out of the current market or want to take courses for personal interest or to improve skills. In this regard, tuition-free MOOCs are a perfect testing ground for innovation, which can then be refined and reapplied, going up the chain of customers until it reaches towards the top. While MOOCs and T-POCs may never topple Harvard, they will nevertheless disrupt higher education as a whole. Shirky [22] points out that the traditional version of a college student (18 to 22 years old, living on campus, and working only part time, if at all) represents a relatively small slice of the higher education pie. Most consumers of higher education are already “non-traditional”—older adults who are employed in full-time jobs.

Although some institutions of higher education may find a way to successfully sidestep these developments, most will be forced to enact major changes. Similar to a football stadium where some spectators stand up, forcing other spectators behind them to stand up, T-POCs will push change at all levels of higher education. Universities sitting in the front row, such as Harvard, MIT, and Stanford, are leading this charge and have very little to lose and much to gain in reputation and influence. These developments will likely lead to an identity crisis for non-elite universities and colleges and prompt a sorting out of what parts of the university “bundle” can be served by T-POCs and what functions, including possible new functions, are best carried out by traditional universities.

4.2 Educational Theory and Practice

An inventory and evaluation of the university “bundle” requires a corresponding review of assumptions about educational theory and practice. These assumptions shape the role of and response to T-POCs in higher education. In this section, we outline current theories and practices, along with implications for stakeholders in higher education. This base will provide a foundation for our proposed framework.

Theories of learning have evolved from behaviorism to cognitivism to constructivism and, more recently, connectivism. Siemens [23] argues that the first three learning theories predate the digital age and are not currently adequate to understand how learning takes place. The advent and diffusion of digital technology, especially Web 2.0 in recent years, implies that knowledge does not have to be necessarily internalized by learners. Rather, students can create their own learning environments where the ability to “synthesize and connect knowledge” that is available using technology networks is more important.
this context, MOOC-like courses can be viewed as a large knowledge network that facilitates learning. Tschofen and Mackness [24] contend that connectivism follows four principles: autonomy, connectedness, diversity, and openness. They argue that MOOCs, because they have these characteristics, provide an ideal testing ground for the theory of connectivism.

Although connectivism has risen to the top in the field of learning theory, it is by no means a consensus. Testing of the theory is still in order, as Tschofen and Mackness [24] imply. If the hybrid online and face-to-face future of the university does in fact come to pass, one of the benefits of creating a framework for inquiry will be the scholarly creation, application, and evaluation of learning theories in various settings.

It is also important not to assume that findings about MOOCs will apply fully to T-POCs, in which all four of the connectivist principles outlined by Tschofen and Mackness [24] are compromised in some way. Autonomy is necessarily limited in by the requirements of a degree or other certification program. Similarly, because of the much smaller size of T-POCs—closer in size to traditional classes—connectedness and diversity are narrower. Openness, too, is restricted by registration and tuition requirements. While some findings from the “testing ground” of MOOCs may be widely applicable, they must be viewed within the constraints of other domains.

4.3 Service Quality

Educational practice can take many forms, with significant implications for the way the higher education bundle is viewed and how it can be adapted.

While the idea of higher education as a production line seems somewhat dated, in practice, this is how many university faculty and functions still operate. On the contrary, we assume that higher education is really a service function. This argument is based on the belief that education is, at its core, a relationship between the student and the instructor. Essentially, the educational experience is created through the dyadic interaction of a student with his/her instructor. This interaction can be thought of as the service delivery. Value (education) is co-created by the instructor and the student through this service delivery [25].

Previous research supports the view of higher education as a service [26] including it in the same category as banking, healthcare, retail, etc. If higher education is a service then students are, essentially, the customers. Unlike the classic production model where a widget has no choice in where it is produced, students have a choice in where they receive their educational services. This choice is at the heart of the move by universities to become increasingly “customer-centric” [27]. As service consumers, students have certain expectations and perceptions of the quality of service they receive. Universities are recognizing the need to measure the quality of the service they deliver in order to improve the student’s educational experience.

The emergence of T-POCs in higher education raises a number of questions related to education and service quality. If higher education is a service based on a dyadic relationship between students and instructors, how will the on-line nature of T-POCs impact student assessments of service quality? It could be argued that the loss of face-to-face interaction will negatively impact a student’s view of the service they received. Can T-POCs be designed to minimize this negative impact? Will students be willing to forgo face-to-face service delivery in favor of T-POCs lower costs and asynchronous nature? Given the importance of service in higher education and the fact that students can be choosy customers, these questions need to be considered early in the T-POC debate.

5. Research Questions

In view of the above factors impacting higher education it is important that higher education avails opportunities for extending reach, reducing costs and harnessing technology by examining T-POCs. The research question being addressed in this study is the following:

What is the impact of offering T-POCs on the stakeholders of the higher education system?

For both faculty and administrators, T-POCs raise serious issues that need to be addressed. This study hopes to facilitate a way to address these issues through the development of a framework which highlights the questions that need to be answered for the various constituent groups.

6. Proposed Framework

Table 1 is a proposed framework for internal stakeholders of universities—students, faculty (including staff), and administration. External stakeholders, including the business community, local community, and global community, are outside the scope of this paper.
# Table 1. Framework of questions about T-POCs for internal stakeholders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>College/University Administration</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- How will T-POCs change the college culture(s) students experience?</td>
<td>- How will T-POCs change the cultural environment in which faculty work?</td>
<td>- How will cultural change be managed?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- What tacit or explicit cultural knowledge may be lost?</td>
<td>- How will faculty engage with students in this changing culture?</td>
<td>- How will the value of culture be accounted for and conserved?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- What cultural values and connections may be gained?</td>
<td>- How will faculty respond to cultural change?</td>
<td>- What tacit cultural knowledge may be lost through the use of T-POCs?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- What tacit or explicit cultural knowledge may be lost?</td>
<td>- What cultural values and connections may be gained?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- What cultural values and connections may be gained?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>- How will T-POCs change the social experience of students?</td>
<td>- How will T-POCs change the social experience of university faculty?</td>
<td>- How will T-POCs change the social experience of university administration?</td>
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<td>- How will T-POCs affect or change the social connections students and other stakeholders?</td>
<td>- How will T-POCs affect or change the social connections among faculty and between faculty other stakeholders?</td>
<td>- How will T-POCs affect or change the social connections between college administrations and other stakeholders?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- What social capital may be lost or gained?</td>
<td>- How will professional networking and mentoring be changed?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- How will professional networking and mentoring be changed?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>- How will T-POCs affect the academic experience of students?</td>
<td>- How will T-POCs affect the academic experience of faculty?</td>
<td>- How will T-POCs influence administrators’ decisions about resource allocation for academic activities?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- What changes to student college preparation must happen (or are already happening)?</td>
<td>- What changes to teaching and research will T-POCs require or encourage?</td>
<td>- What budgets will be cut and what budgets may be increased?</td>
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<td>- How will activities that may have been subsidized by tuition be funded?</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- How will faculty respond to these changes?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Financial &amp; Socio-Economic</td>
<td>What are the financial costs and benefits of T-POCs to students?</td>
<td>What are the financial costs and benefits of T-POCs to faculty?</td>
<td>What are the financial costs and benefits of T-POCs to administrators?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- How will socio-economic class of students affect and be affected by T-POCs?</td>
<td>- What are the socio-economic costs and benefits to faculty resulting from T-POCs?</td>
<td>- What are the socio-economic costs and benefits of T-POCs to administrators?</td>
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<td>- What are the socio-economic costs and benefits of T-POCs?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Morals &amp; Character</td>
<td>- How will T-POCs affect the morals and character of students and graduates?</td>
<td>- How will T-POCs affect the morals and character of faculty?</td>
<td>- How will T-POCs affect the morals and character of administrators?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- How will 18- to 22-year-old students “grow up” in a T-POC environment?</td>
<td>- What will faculty do to build students’ character in the T-POC environment?</td>
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<td>- What character traits will be built, and what are the determining factors?</td>
<td>- How will their own character respond and be influenced?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| Legal & Political | - What political effects will T-POCs have on college students?  
- How will this DI connect or disconnect them from others politically?  
What legal rights will T-POC students have related to grading and credentialing?  
How will differences in international legal systems be addressed? | - How will T-POCs influence faculty politically?  
- How will power relations between stakeholders be influenced?  
How will faculty deal with legal issues in T-POCs? Who will resolve disputes about cheating, treatment of students, course content, etc.? | - How will T-POCs affect administrations politically?  
- How will power relations between stakeholders be influenced?  
What role will administrators play regarding legal issues in T-POCs? Who will be granted authority to make decisions?  
What incentives might these authorities have? |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Scientific | - How might T-POCs influence students’ scientific understanding and skill?  
- How might students scientific training with mentors, TAs, etc., be diminished or enhanced? | - How will T-POCs affect faculty research, publishing, and teaching in the scientific realm?  
- How will scientific activities that may have been subsidized by tuition be funded?  
- What scientific and societal changes might result? | - How might the way administrations and administrators value scientific knowledge in the environment resulting from T-POCs? |
| Artistic | - How might T-POCs influence the artistic sensibilities and abilities of students?  
- How will right- and left-brained activities be valued in the T-POC environment?  
- What kind of artistic thinking, training, and output will result? | - How will T-POCs affect arts and music faculty?  
- How will departments and majors that may have been subsidized by tuition be funded?  
- Will specialized arts schools increase while the inclusion of in-person arts and music instruction on most campuses decrease? | How will arts and music education be valued and evaluated by administrators in the T-POC environment? |
| Creative, Inventive, & Entrepreneurial | How will student creativity be and entrepreneurship be affected by T-POCs? Is physical presence needed, and in what types of classes? | How will creativity of faculty be affected by T-POCs?  
How will funding for creative endeavors be affected?  
What creative output will result? | How will administrations fund for creative activities?  
How will creative activities be evaluated and rewarded? |
| Linguistic | - What linguistic abilities and preparations might students need to have to successfully complete a T-POC?  
- How will language use be judged? For example, how role will the concept of Standard English play?  
- What linguistic abilities will be developed in T-POCs, and how do these differ from traditional classrooms? | - How will faculty respond to linguistic differences in T-POCs?  
- How will computer grading systems accommodate differences between English speakers and writers in different parts of the world? | - Will administrators recognize language as a potential issue for T-POCs? |
| Technological | - What technological resources and skills will students need to succeed in the T-POC environment?  
- How will technologically mediated communication change relationships between students and other stakeholders? | - How will T-POCs change faculty interaction with technology?  
- How will technologically mediated communication change relationships between faculty and other stakeholders? | - What technological investments will administrations make in the T-POC environment?  
- How will these decisions impact other stakeholders?  
- What outputs will result? |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Networking &amp; Mentoring</th>
<th>Professional &amp; “Soft Skill” Development</th>
<th>Job &amp; Technical Skill preparation</th>
<th>Identity &amp; Branding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| - How will students’ personal and professional networks form in the T-POC environment?  
- What role will social media play?  
- How important is face-to-face contact in personal and professional networking?  
- How will changes in personal networking affect students’ academics, social skills, and professional success long term?  
- How will students seek out and find mentors?  
- What setting with this mentorship take place in? | - How will T-POCs affect students’ professional preparation and employability?  
- How might professional certifying organizations respond to T-POCs and with what effects?  
- How will the “soft skills” of students coming from T-POC-heavy institutions develop?  
- What is the proper mix of online and face-to-face interaction to facilitate the optimal development of necessary soft skills? | - What job and technical skills will students develop in T-POC-heavy institutions?  
- In what ways will they be more prepared or less prepared? | - How will the use of T-POCs affect how students identify with their university?  
- Will the use of third-party courses lessen a university’s brand in the eyes of its students? |
| - What role will faculty play in helping students create professional networks?  
- What new connections will faculty need to make to remain relevant and to help students form their own professional networks?  
- How will T-POCs change the way faculty build their professional and personal networks?  
- How will faculty engage in mentorship?  
- How will mentorship take place in a T-POC?  
- What alternative means might be realized? | - How will T-POCs affect the professional experience and status of faculty?  
- How will T-POCs affect faculty’s relations with professionals in their fields and vice versa?  
- What role will faculty play in helping students develop soft skills?  
- What role will faculty play in student organizations that help develop soft skills?  
- What are the best methods to facilitate this development? | - What role will faculty play in helping students develop job and technical skills?  
- How might T-POCs augment faculty efforts to help students develop job skills? | - How will the use of T-POCs affect how faculty identify with their university? |
| - How will T-POCs affect administrators’ professional and personal networks?  
- How will administrators enable or inhibit mentorship?  
- If T-POCs affect mentorship, how will administrators respond? | - How will T-POCs affect the professional status of administrators and their relationships to other stakeholders?  
- How might student organizations be affected in the T-POC environment?  
- What resources will administrators grant to student organizations, and what leadership roles for students will be made available? | - How will administrators evaluate the effectiveness T-POCs as a replacement for individual job and technical skills preparation? | - How will T-POCs affect the brand of a university?  
- How will administrators build a strong identity for their universities while using third-party courses? |
7. Discussion and Implications: Towards a T-POC Framework for Stakeholders

In the above framework, each category of stakeholder is necessarily broad. Answers to the proposed questions will differ depending on the specific case. For example, the questions for student stakeholders will be answered differently depending on whether the given group of students is young, older, or mixed in age, on whether they are attending private universities, state universities, or community colleges, and on how they are paying for their education.

The intention of this framework is not to advocate in favor of or against T-POCs, but rather to help various stakeholders answer questions relevant to T-POCs and their potential role as a spearhead of disruptive innovation in higher education.

With a clearer idea of the impacts of T-POCs on higher education, more detailed research can be done. Follow-up questions might include the following:

- What is the bundle of services higher education is perceived as offering?
- What services are they actually offering?
- What is the quality and value of these bundled services?
- How could the bundle of services offered by universities best be offered via a hybrid model?
- What is the right mix of T-POCs and the traditional university experience?
- What value do employers recognize universities as adding to the graduates they hire?
- What unanticipated consequences (costs, problems, and benefits) might there be to T-POCs?

Ultimately, inquiry into the role of T-POCs is an inquiry about the nature and purpose of education itself. Is education a product? Should the focus instead be on the process? These are, in our view, the wrong questions because they treat learning as a lifeless phenomenon, which, at its extreme reduces education to a commodity. We believe that education is, in the end, a relationship. As such, it requires dialogue and inquiry among stakeholders, which may be facilitated, it is hoped, by the proposed framework.

8. Conclusion

Third-party online courses (T-POC) and MOOCS introduce important changes to how students will receive education in the future. The disruptive power of technology in delivering education provides potential opportunities for educational institutions, while at the same time creating challenges, as universities need to understand how technology can be harnessed. Institutions of higher education that fail to respond to these emerging opportunities and challenges risk being disrupted by technology. The framework proposed in this research helps stakeholders understand the issues involved so they can develop a strategy for tradeoffs and choices they need to make in the future.

References


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